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TOWARD CULTIVATING CONCENTRATION

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Great warfare is waged by teachers of English in secondary schools against forces hostile to concentration among the youthful minds, and myriad are the methods of attack. Nearly every inaccuracy possible to English thought and language takes its rise from lack of sincere thinking. Shallow thought, errors in grammar, spelling, faulty punctuation, words inadequate in meaning, incomplete sentences, overcrowded sentences, misplaced modifiers, trailing clauses, pronouns distressingly in need of antecedents, usually spring, not from a student's imperfect knowledge, or a teacher's careless elucidation, but from habitual lack of concentration on the pupil's part.

Within the educational system itself are tendencies fostering this foe of mental development. The multiplicity of grade subjects to be taught, the brevity of recitation periods, and numerous interruptions in the daily routine of a teacher's lesson plans serve as hindrances to continuity of definite thought.

The teacher is aware of hindrances to the cultivation of powers of attention without the educational system as well as within. Sometimes the detractions are social; sometimes they are within the home; sometimes it is outside business employment that engrosses the thought. Then there is the alluring billboard that promises wondrous eye-delights on the moving-picture stage, just inside the door, and encourages the entranced youth to hoard his pennies, to deny his appetite pie and ice-cream cones, to forego trolley rides, and use the sturdy means of locomotion with which nature endowed him, in order that he may lose himself for a whole hour and a half, and even through yet another series of reels, in the most thrilling complication of "The Iron Claw."

What can a teacher offer equal to the spectacular gains that boy's sacrifices afford him? What can he do to overcome habits already too thoroughly rooted in the youthful mind?

First, there is the plan of studying with the child the lesson to be recited at the next class meeting. As a step toward forming habits of concentration this is an invaluable method. It should teach the boy or girl how to study. But such a system has a time limit, which, if overreached, results in lack of initiative in the mental power of the child. He becomes a mental dependent and wavers before independent effort, though excellent results are obtained under guidance.

A bridge leading from concentrated effort under direction to elementary self-directed intensity of thought may be constructed by the simple device of oral reading and reproduction, beginning, perhaps, with a minute's reading by the individual student. It is interesting to compare the number of lines read by each student in this short space of time with the quantity and order of thought he is able to reproduce at the conclusion of his reading. Gradually the student will advance to such a degree that he can read for a period of five minutes passages new to him and reproduce much of the thought in much the same logical order of its arrangement.

Another simple device conducive to the present phase of mental benefit is that of reproducing orally a talk or speech. For example, on Arbor Day the students of a certain class were requested to prepare talks on some phase or other of animal or plant life. The assignment had the advantage of being of peculiar interest to the boys and girls. After each talk a member of the class was called upon to repeat as nearly as possible what he had just heard. Interest in the subject led to success in carrying out the aim of the recitation—an excellent preparation for more difficult attention to speeches to follow a little later in the term.

A teacher has ever to bear in mind that a fair rate of speed in thought is an essential characteristic—second only to accuracy—in well-developed powers of concentration. In this rapidly moving age of specialization an educated person may be said to be the one who does a given thing best and quickest.

While a pupil is becoming experienced in thinking rapidly and consistently on his feet, the teacher has another difficulty to surmount, since this same exercise of the individual student must be so planned as to be a mental exercise for the entire class. Otherwise the habit of inattention may be racing three to the second against the habit of concentration.

As an experiment in reasoning, inseparable from ability to concentrate, a teacher recently made a list of the words incorrectly spelled in a student's composition. Much to the student's astonishment, he, "who never could spell," by a little correlation found it possible to reason out the correct spelling of more than two-thirds of his long list of inaccuracies. Among these was the vital word itself—"misspelled." The student was asked to spell "take," "mistake," "use," "misuse," "understand," "misunderstand," "trust," "mistrust"; to guess at the meaning of the prefix "mis"; to spell "spell," "misspell." Naturally he did so correctly. The entire list of inaccuracies was subjected to a method of reasoning, and the youth learned he could spell ordinarily well if he could concentrate.

The ear accustomed to ungrammatical, unidiomatic English seems to instruct the tongue in its utterance. Reading aloud and memorizing selections will do much toward cultivating pure English. Habits of concentration will do more, compelling agreement between subject and verb, pronoun and antecedent, forcing the modifier to "hug" closely the word it modifies. In this way, best of all, can the linguistic drawbacks to business as well as social advancement be overcome, and a certain self-confidence, which will command respect, be insured. With our numerous opportunities to learn good English from the stage, the platform, the vast field of good literature, he who "goes to his grave with bad English in his mouth" has only himself to blame, unless it be that his instructors have wavered in daily insistence on concentrated thought.

For advanced students it is a stimulus to effort in cultivating this quality of success to have an object in view. Let them cherish, if they will, the hope of a name in print or work in the throbbing reportorial line. Few will steer their course definitely to these precarious goals, the magazine or newspaper. Should they ulti-

mately do so, in an elementary course in journalism in secondary schools they will acquire nothing unessential to such a pursuit. What with the increasing demand among newspaper men for honesty of character, conciseness, method, snap, breadth of information, coupled with imagination, poise, speed, clearly constructed sentences, an approach to style of a certain kind, accuracy in form of manuscript, good English, careful spelling, punctuation, grammar, the cultivation of these qualities in such a course will give to the students everything needed in the way of practical English in practical life. The vision of a bank check at the end of a bit of composition writing is not a harmful stimulus to concentration.

The demands upon an English course are not small. It must develop both heart and mind; it must quicken the perception and broaden the sympathy; it must liven the powers of observation and emphasize the good in human nature; it must quicken the imagination and strengthen a love of honesty; it must awaken appreciation and give balance to judgment; it must give ease, force, sincerity to expression; in short, if it does not create the philanthropist, the genius, it must at least be a valuable asset in the evolution of such, from the Clara Bartons and Tennysons and Thackerays down, or up, to the Edisons. By concentrated thought the scholar thinks his way through the impossible to the possible.

Strategy against the foes to concentration may be resorted to, a Parthian device seeming to encourage the host rather than to disperse it, and commonly recognized as browsing. Students appreciate anything approaching the informal within the forbidding-looking walls of an institution of learning. During vacant periods each day they will welcome the opportunity of a browsing hour as a bit of freedom and relaxation. Then upon what shall they browse? One student feels an unconfessed yearning for bits that a school of expression affords; here he will find choice books in oral English. Another has had a compliment or two paid him on his choice of vocabulary; he can feed fat his greed for words on a Thesaurus, *The Verbalist*, an unabridged dictionary, books of synonyms and antonyms. There are typical magazine stories; selected, best, students' compositions; books of reference with passages liberally blue penciled; pages on the use of "Oh" and "O,"

“shall” and “will,” and so forth, cut from discarded or worn-out rhetorics and pinned together. There are books on “How to Become a Journalist,” “Self-Culture in English,” and “How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day” to provoke the curiosity of the naturally curious. And there is a book, much in demand among the students, on “Social Usage.” Novels there are, essays, poems, and short stories, dramas and dramatic passages for classroom presentation. As an abetting agent in stimulating concentrated thought, the last named, the drama, takes an enjoyable and interest-awakening place. It compels the imagination to shake off its lethargy and strengthens the power to concentrate through the mental process of memorizing.

Beginning not later than the sixth semester of the high-school course and ending not earlier than the last week of the Senior year in high school, with gradually increasing difficulties in depth and extent of subject-matter, the students could make marvelous progress in thought concentration by means of a simple, systematic, weekly exercise—that of taking down the words of a speaker on a certain subject while he speaks, or of listening to him and later reproducing on paper what he has said. If the talk is informal, the first part of the recitation period could be given to the speech itself, the latter half to reproducing it.

Is not the unpardonable sin in an educational system that of failing to guide the young mind along habits of consistent thought? Carefully planned and carefully executed aims in recitations are all that are necessary to remove this evil from, it is hoped, an ever-decreasing category of pedagogical wrongs. Hindrances within the school system and without are conquerable in this respect if the teacher has the will. It is the teacher’s obligation to the student and to society, it is the teacher’s contribution to the progress of his age, it is the teacher’s great privilege and reward of effort to develop thinking minds. Nor is it “stone-blind” optimism to say that the teacher can daily see increasing capacity for concentration in his students—another of his rewards.